

HOW BOOKS ARE WIRED FOR SOUND

Robert B. Irwin

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## HOW BOOKS ARE WIRED FOR SOUND

by ROBERT B. IRWIN

*Executive Director, American Foundation for the Blind*

HV1733

I copy one

THERE are more than 200,000 blind people in the United States. More than half of them over 50 years old. Less than 20 per cent of them can read Braille.

That is why we have talking books.

The talking book is a long-playing phonograph record which reads aloud to the blind. Modern technical skill has made it possible to record a novel of average length on 15 to 20 double-faced records. Most of these records are made by the American Foundation at their own studios, 15 West 16th Street, New York City. They are then distributed through the Library of Congress to 27 regional libraries for the blind, where they are loaned without charge to blind borrowers. Talking books are a gift from the tax-payers of the United States to their blind fellow-citizens. About 1200 titles—novels, plays, poems and non-fiction—are now available.

The success of the talking book in the last ten years has been made possible only by the generous co-operation of both authors and publishers. The Authors League and the Book Publishers Association have worked out an agreement with

the American Foundation for the Blind which insures that no commercial use will ever be made of these records. They cannot be played over the air or re-sold. Each disk is labeled both in Braille and in "ink-type" with the title, the author's name and the copyright imprint. A nominal sum of \$25 is usually charged by the publisher or each title, unless—as often happens—the fee is waived.

Each side of a modern talking-book record plays for fifteen or sixteen minutes, which means that an average set of fifteen-eighteen records reads to a blind person for about nine hours. Some books, of course, need many more records: "War and Peace," for instance, has been recorded on 119 double-faced twelve-inch records. The runner-up to this is Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind"—80 records. The biggest set of records of all—169—was used for the Old and New Testaments.

Blind people like to get an idea of an author's personality by hearing his actual voice on the Talking Book discs. Some of the writers whose voices serve as frontispieces to their Talking Books are William Beebe, Stephen Vincent Benet, Raymond Ditmars, Harry

Emerson Fosdick, Archibald MacLeish, Thomas Mann, Eleanor Roosevelt and William Shirer. Among those who have been kind enough to read complete works are Alexander Woollcott, Jan Struther, Glenway Wescott, Christopher Morley, Clifton Fadiman and John Mason Brown. Sometimes voices are not too successful: when the Bible was recorded, for instance, it was found that professional actors actually produced the effect of ministers reading better than the ministers themselves.

Except for the parts read by the authors, the voices on Talking Books are usually those of trained actors.

After a time, Talking Books began to experiment with incidental music and sound effects. The first opportunity came with Dickens' "Christmas Carol", which is introduced with the strains of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." In recording Benet's "John Brown's Body", the Foundation went a step further and used a number of voices to interpret different sections of the book, as well as incidental music of the Civil War period.

All titles are selected by the Library of Congress, in part from suggestions sent in by a group of librarians and critics and a committee of Talking Book readers.

Talking books must be played on a special type of phonograph which is sold at cost by the Ameri-

can Foundation for the Blind. As most blind people cannot afford these devices, even when they are manufactured and sold without profit, the WPA was prevailed upon to set up and operate a project for their manufacture, under the supervision of the American Foundation and the sponsorship of the Library of Congress. The machines are the property of the Library, and are allotted to the various states in proportion to their population. More than 23,000 Talking Book machines have been produced in this way.

Any blind adult in the United States with one of these machines can write to the library for the blind which serves his district and receive the Talking Books free in a special government container. When he has finished the book, he merely turns over an address card fitted into a slot on the container and drops the container in the mailbox.

In their short career, Talking Books have already come to occupy the position of a kind and indispensable friend in the lives of many blind people: a friend that never grows tired or hoarse or out of breath, that rarely mispronounces a word or misreads a sentence; a friend—above all—that has succeeded in leading many of our blind out of the bondage of darkness, and has opened up to them new happiness in the world of books.

## PAMPHLET BINDERS

This is No. 1525

also carried in stock in the following sizes

ITEM	WIDE	THICKNESS	ITEM	WIDE	THICKNESS
1523	9 inches	7 inches $\frac{3}{16}$ inch	1529	12 inches	10 inches $\frac{3}{16}$ inch
1524	10 "	7 "	1530	12 "	$9\frac{1}{16}$ "
1525	9 "	6 "	1532	13 "	11 "
1526	$9\frac{3}{4}$ "	$7\frac{1}{4}$ "	1533	14 "	11 "
1527	$10\frac{1}{4}$ "	$7\frac{1}{4}$ "	1534	15 "	12 "
1528	11 "	8 "			

Other sizes made to order.

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